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TEACHING COMPOSITION. WHAT RESEARCH SAYS TO THE TEACHER, NUMBER 18.

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ALTHOUGH CHILDREN'S NEEDS FOR WRITTEN EXPRESSION PROBABLY PARALLEL THOSE OF ADULTS, THE REASON BEHIND CHILDREN'S CHOICE OF WRITING OVER SPEAKING IN GIVEN INSTANCES IS OPEN TO CONJECTURE. MOREOVER, THE COMMON ASSUMPTION BY TEACHERS THAT CHILDREN CAN AND SHOULD WRITE ABOUT PERSONAL INTERESTS OUGHT TO BE TEMPERED BY THE IDEA THAT MANY INTERESTS ARE BETTER SERVED BY ACTIVITIES OTHER THAN WRITING. FOR EXAMPLE, FREQUENT OPPORTUNITIES SHOULD BE PROVIDED FOR YOUNG CHILDREN TO DICTATE ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS, INASMUCH AS DICTATED COMPOSITIONS YIELD A MORE EXTENDED DELINEATION OF IDEAS AND A GREATER VARIETY AND NUMBER OF WORDS THAN DO SELF-WRITTEN COMPOSITIONS OF ELEMENTARY-GRADE CHILDREN. WHEN THE CHILD DOES ATTEMPT SELF-WRITTEN COMPOSITION, HIS INTELLECTUAL CREATIVITY AND SPONTANEITY SHOULD NOT BE FRUSTRATED BY THE REQUIREMENT THAT HE USE ONLY THOSE WORDS HE CAN SPELL. PROBABLY THE MOST THOROUGH AND DEPENDABLE EVALUATION OF A SCHOOL'S WRITING PROGRAM CAN BE OBTAINED BY COMBINING STANDARDIZED TESTING, AN EVALUATION (EITHER OF THE DETAILED ANALYSIS OR FIRST-IMPRESSION TYPE) OF THE WRITING OF ALL STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL, AND A SAMPLING OF SELECTED INDIVIDUAL CASE RECORDS. (THIS BOOKLET IS AVAILABLE FROM THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSN., 1201 SIXTEENTH ST., N.W., WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 FOR $0.25--10 PERCENT DISCOUNT FOR 2-9 COPIES, 20 PERCENT FOR 10 OR MORE.) (RD).

WHAT RESEARCH SAYS TO THE TEACHER

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Teaching Composition

Alvina T. Burrows

TE 000 131

Department of Classroom Teachers
of the National Education Association

The "What Research Says to the Teacher" Series is published to provide classroom teachers and prospective teachers with concise, valid, and up-to-date summaries of educational research findings and their implications for teaching.

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Teaching Composition

CONTENTS

DICTATION IN THE PRIMARY GRADES 3
- Values and Differences in Dictation 4
- Group Dictation 5
- Individual Dictation 7
- Use of Dictated Reports and Stories 10

THE BEGINNING OF INDEPENDENT WRITING 12
- Copying of Dictation 13
- Extending the Beginning of a Letter or Report 13
- Planning a Report—Writing Independently 14
- Relation of Pictures to Writing 14

COMPOSITION IN THE MIDDLE GRADES 15
- Content of Written Composition 15
- Subjective or Personal Writing 18
- Techniques That Stimulate Story Writing 19
- Teaching Correct Mechanics 23

RELATION OF SPELLING TO COMPOSITION 25

RELATION OF HANDWRITING TO COMPOSITION 25

EVALUATION OF CHILDREN'S COMPOSITION 26

PROBLEMS OF MOTIVATION 29

SELECTED RESEARCH REFERENCES 31

GENERAL REFERENCES 33

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TEACHING COMPOSITION

DURING THE PAST 25 years research in children's writing has stemmed from widely differing assumptions. A notion persists that children need to be given specific assignments of what to write about. Equally vigorous is the idea that children have within them reservoirs of experience, imagery, and feeling waiting to be released. Some teachers believe that children grow best as writers when their work is criticized, repaired, and polished; others contend that such vigorous procedures actually restrict children's learning.

Research and measurement also have been influenced by other divergent views implied by the following questions: Do children write more and better when they write about real experience or when they write about vicarious or symbolized experience? Do they write more and better if they discuss content first and then write or when this order is reversed? Are boys and girls more prolific when they dictate or when they serve as their own scribes? These questions suggest widely different premises. At different times, for different purposes, and under different conditions most of them are probably sound.

The research that has accumulated in several decades points to the fact that a number of plans, when enthusiastically carried out, will provide effective stimuli and some of the experience needed for growth in writing. From most of the studies, no matter what the specific hypothesis or focus of attention, one thread of meaning emerges: Children write vigorously and improve as authors when given the stimulus and support of an adult who cares about each child and his success in putting his ideas into written form.

DICTATION IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

One of the clearest signals lighted by research says plainly: Give young children plenty of opportunity to dictate stories, reports, verse, titles, questions, plans, and other forms of composition.

Values and Differences in Dictation

Since the early 1920's many investigations have shown the value of dictation in increasing immediate productivity and in developing a zest for learning to write. Learning to make informal reports and observations contributes substantially to the quality of later independent writing. In the early grades, when children dictate, their compositions are of greater length, are more varied in ideas, and use a richer variety of expression than when they depend upon their own limited handwriting and spelling skills.

The differences between boys and girls in their facility in dictation are especially interesting and, at times, baffling. In general, boys in primary grades do better at dictating and girls do better at writing, but research is not conclusive as to reasons for this difference. The explanation may lie in the advanced maturity and growth of girls as compared with boys in the 6- to 8-year range. Perhaps differences of motivation exist, but these differences between the averages of groups must not close our eyes to individual differences in length, substance, and quality of expression, regardless of sex. Both boys and girls need frequent opportunity to see their ideas transmuted from the oral to the written word.

Although the volume of dictation is one significant measure of its merit, other values are of equal importance. These values extend into later writing and into other activities because they are related to basic motivation. When freed from the physical drudgery of handwriting, pupils enjoy a sense of power which in itself spurs creativity. The rapid flashing of childlike imagination, when caught by the teacher's record, takes on a dignified form which others can see and hear. The child composer, hearing or seeing his work, senses the satisfactions of personal projection. He sees that words stand for ideas which only a short time before were an invisible part of him. Characters and events reach out beyond the confines of time and place, and the pupil's new sense of personal power propels him toward further expression.

Another dividend obtained from investing time and energy in pupil dictation is the strengthening of reading interests. Some teachers of beginning reading rely upon children's dictated "ex-

perience stories" for the major content and practice in reading. Children have important things to say about their pets, dolls, and toys and about many things they have done and seen; they want to share their experiences with the class. Their own words and phrases in script and print make sense to them. The link between the real idea or experience and the symbols is close and immediate. This approach to the teaching of reading becomes even more effective when group composition is combined with individual composition.

In addition to satisfactions leading toward further effort in writing, dictation helps children learn about the structural elements of language. Improvement in sentence structure has appeared in the case records of individuals who have dictated over a period of only a few months. Hearing one's own stories or reports read aloud sharpens the awareness of voice patterns at ends of sentences. Most children learn early in life to use appropriately meaningful tones to begin sentences and to drop or level off the voice, to slow down their words, or to pause at the ends of sentences. Even by the age of five they can use these signals in talking and listening with remarkable efficiency for all types of sentences—simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Practice in dictation makes them aware of these habits of cadence and intonation which they learned imitatively in the preschool years. Matching written forms to spoken patterns facilitates both reading and further writing.

Seeing and hearing one's own sentences that were uttered with no consciousness of their form or pattern relates the facts of capitalization and terminal punctuation to voice and breathing signals already under automatic control in talking and listening. In both individual and group dictation, these structural elements are experienced in a context of meaning. These meaning signals of voice, tone, and tempo must be used again and again in the act of composition, whether one dictates to a secretary or to a machine; and later they must be applied to many steps of independent writing.

Group Dictation

In the busy world of a primary classroom, much of the dictation is necessarily performed by groups for common purposes. The

techniques appropriate to teaching the following types of composition by group dictation are needed by all elementary school teachers, although dictation procedures will certainly be used more in the primary than in the later grades.

Letters. Most pupils readily see the necessity of letters both for work at school and for adults. Often letter writing has been used as a "real-life" learning situation to the exclusion of other sorts of expression of equal or even greater ultimate value to children. Research has not yet shown the relative merits of letter writing and other forms of written composition in developing vigor of ideas, clarity, or individuality of expression. Meanwhile, we must accept letter writing as necessary, by common consent, and recognize that it is widely taught with varying degrees of originality and effectiveness.

Utilitarian materials. Composition is concerned with many kinds of utilitarian materials such as memos, notices, titles, posters, advertisements, cards, and greetings. Learning to compose these communications follows a general developmental sequence from dictation to dictation and illustrating, dictation and partial copying, complete copying, independent writing of parts, and later writing of the entire composition. The term *independent*, of course, is a relative one. Throughout elementary school most children need much help with spelling and with the arrangement and rearrangement of ideas in the rough drafts of their practical compositions.

Stories and verse. Group dictation often produces stories and verse. Since these types of writing are more likely to reach their full flowering as individual expression, they will be treated under individual composition. The chief value of group dictation of these highly subjective expressions is the stimulation it gives to individuals. The chief danger of group effort is that it may force the individual exclusively into group-accepted boundaries and patterns of thought and feeling.

Although research does not yet justify any one set of activities, the following procedures are effective steps toward independence in writing and skill in the use of correct mechanics, without sacrificing individuality and enthusiasm for writing.

1. A group of children participate in dictating a letter growing out of their real and present social situation or need. The teacher

duplicates the letter and the children sign their names. (Each may sign his own copy or all may sign one copy.)

2. The group dictates a report or record. The teacher makes a record or duplicates it. The children read, illustrate, and perhaps bind the report with related materials and keep it in individual books or magazines.

3. In group discussion children plan the sequence of a narrative cartoon, report, or story. Group decisions are made on the number of pictures needed and the episodes necessary for communication. Both individually and in groups the children sketch cartoons and dictate some of the conversation or captions to the teacher. The children copy needed material from the blackboard or from slips of paper on which the teacher has written the words individuals asked for.

Individual Dictation

Most primary teachers regret that there is so little time for individual dictation. Yet, curiously enough, most of the research studies of dictation among primary children have centered on individual work. These studies have compared individual boys with individual girls; analyzed the dictated and written product of the same child as to length, number of ideas, and variety of expression; and have otherwise sought to appraise various factors. Such research has shown that dictated composition results in a more extended delineation of ideas, and, hence, in a greater variety and number of words used.

Stories and reports. Pupils gain satisfactions from individual attention and from the opportunity "to project" themselves into the dictated composition. We cannot fully identify the different outcomes from writing and dictating about assigned topics as compared with those from shared experiences, because of many subjective factors. Our evaluations are largely subjective and many of the outcomes, such as increased motivation, also are subjective. Also, the rapport between teacher and pupils affects composition output markedly. So, too, does fatigue. These factors cannot be balanced or appraised completely. In one significant study, for example, a group of children *dictated* lengthier compositions, with greater variety of expression, on an assigned topic than they did on a shared experience. They *wrote* more, however, about their shared experiences.

Clearly, in teaching composition, the preferences of both teacher and pupil are important for further study. We know that even formal assignments, when associated with a rich curriculum, can offer children worthy challenge. The preparation of explanations for bulletin board exhibits or other displays and the drafting of items for class and individual books often tap motives which release strong streams of energy. The blending of topics of study and shared experiences in an active primary program occurs—or should occur—almost daily. An effective modern school is characterized by sharing of all sorts of experiences, both orally and visually. Good teaching relates topics met in informal reading or in study to firsthand learnings both within the classroom and outside.

Experience shows clearly that children learn effectively when they see that their dictation and writing serve valid purposes both in and out of school. By contrast, they see that writing is not necessary when face-to-face contacts are more efficient. There is little sound reason for all children in a class to write reports on a trip and to read and show them to the group when all have been on the same excursion. Motivation for such an exercise is likely to be negative.

The transition from oral storytelling to dictating is relatively easy to bring about. Most primary classes have frequent periods for telling about real experiences. Children like to show and explain all sorts of things which interest them: a beloved doll, a picture, an odd plant, a new toy or an old coin, insects, stones, leaves—an almost limitless array of real materials. These talking situations foster simple, clear explanations and the ability to marshal ideas in sequence for the interest and understanding of an audience. At the primary level such oral composition furnishes opportunity to express ideas, to organize them, and to gain immediate satisfaction from the communication. Telling also fortifies the thinking-expressing cycle needed for later, more complex writing. The interplay between oral and written composition is an essential one for many facets of growth.

The transition from oral to dictated composition may be only a matter of the teacher's jotting down the speaker's story. Many teachers develop a system of abbreviations whereby they can keep up with ordinary speed of speaking. But when one gets

behind, asking the child to wait so the writer can "catch up" often gives him a chance to think out more clearly what he wants to say. In the "story circle" or similar informal group, the classroom teacher writes unobtrusively without focusing attention upon the recording. The essential thing is that the child is telling a story to an audience of his peers who are eagerly listening for the climax of the experience. When he has finished, the teacher may comment that the story promised to be so interesting that she had made a record of it. Or she may record several stories before making this sort of comment. She then reads aloud to see if she has caught what the speaker intended, thus reinforcing the importance of clarity. Asking for reactions to interesting incidents or to a colorful way of "telling a picture" lifts attention to ways of giving uniqueness and vitality to experience reporting. Others may be invited to share the fun of having experiences recorded. Many will want to try this technique if for no other reason than to have the teacher's attention.

Other ways exist to initiate dictation of experience stories. The teacher may simply announce after several periods of group experience reporting that she will have time to take some down individually. Preparing a place to write and dictate apart from the group and getting the stage set is next in order. Usually the author wants to sit or stand quite close to the person who records his ideas and feelings.

To get ready for individual dictation, the classroom teacher should plan some quiet, relaxing work for the class as a whole. Weaving, crayoning of pictures, looking at picture books, reading alone or with a friend, modeling clay, and doing number games are examples of work needing a minimum of supervision. At least, *after* children have used these media many times and know where materials are and how to care for them, this variety may be attempted. Each teacher discovers what works best in a particular class when she wants to free herself for work with individuals. Often periods of from 5 to 10 minutes without interruption can be arranged in the classroom, and these are usually long enough for a composition or two to be recorded.

Poetry. Both teachers and pupils in many schools have earned deep satisfaction from their efforts at lyrical expression, although little true research is available concerning methods and tech-

niques peculiar to poetry production. Teachers who successfully stimulate poetry dictation or writing appear to provide a variety of creative outlets. They are concerned with releasing individuality in dance, painting, music, and other forms of expression as well as in writing. Within this atmosphere, conducive to many kinds of creativity, some techniques for stimulating the dictating and writing of verse have been found wholesome:

1. Establish rapport and ease between teacher and class and among the children; welcome all honest products no matter how childlike or crude; aim to develop self-confidence and self-respect.

2. Read aloud a great deal of poetry, some of it free and unrhymed; avoid using a single poem or group of poems as a model: read some verse to establish a mood for a poetry writing or dictating period.

3. Provide times for the class to work on quiet, relaxing activities and invite individual volunteers to dictate their poetic ideas to you, usually in private.

4. Provide experience in observing sensory detail and emphasize pleasure in finding colorful, exact oral expression for the experience—the smell of salt wind, the feeling of crisp leaves on dry, hard-baked fields or paths, the thrust of wind, the images in fog and clouds and tree forms, the light and shadow patterns of city buildings. These group activities help to build sensitivity to language; they are not to be used as subjects for required writing nor for words or phrases to be incorporated in individual verse.

5. Prize uniqueness of expression as the right of each child and as effective individual style, thus keeping the way open for change and growth.

6. Share poems with the class if the *author* is willing. Avoid overdoing praise and publicity and eliminate negation. Aim for the feeling that to write verse is as normal as to sing or dance or paint.

7. Respect the child's product as you respect any artist's; do not tamper with it; preserve it as you do other valuable writings.

Use of Dictated Reports and Stories

Children create most of their stories, reports, letters, and essays for an audience. Whether writing, dictating, or telling, they are expressing themselves to someone, usually someone known well and held in high esteem. Both group and individual

dictation are part of a cycle of communication. The audience is part of this cycle from the beginning to the end. When a record is made from contributions of an entire class, no new audience is involved, yet the product is none the less socially purposeful.

After a report has been recorded, the teacher seeks the nearest appropriate time for reading it aloud. Young children want immediate returns for their efforts. At the conclusion of a period, those who dictated reports should hear what they have said. They may suggest corrections of obvious omissions.

When a child is dictating, the teacher should avoid making corrections, since they tend to make the child halting and critical at the very time the teacher is trying to free the child's ideas and feelings. Even at the end of the dictating, elaborate correction in phrasing and wording should not be encouraged. In the primary grades, our limited research suggests that it is more desirable to cherish fluency and uniqueness of expression than complete correctness by adult standards. Gross errors will be prevented by the teacher as she makes her record. For example, "I seen" and "he done" will be changed to their correct counterparts with no comment since no change of sense will result. If the class notes such improvements, the teacher comments that writing requires a few changes from the way we sometimes speak. Otherwise no comment is needed.

After a class has dictated several group reports or stories, the teacher may demonstrate how she rereads to check spelling, punctuation, and clear sentences before she makes a chart for class display. Such checking is especially important if the children are to copy a letter, captions, or a report for their parents or for their own books, or for an exhibit.

The purpose of a composition (dictated and/or written) places responsibilities upon those who produce the composition. Letters are checked and sent. Explanations or notices are posted where needed. Reports made for a class book or for individual booklets to be taken home are bound or stapled, illustrated, and sent to their destinations. Hence, corrections, if any, must be neatly made.

Individually dictated stories are considerably different in kind from the above utilitarian missives. In grades 1 and 2 dictated stories are likely to be telegraphic, sometimes symbolic, and often

little more than a narrative projection. They contain little depth of characterization and very little balance of design. Despite the absence of these adult-cherished characteristics, children love to hear one another's stories. They fill in the gaps and delight in the swiftness of action regardless of glaring inconsistencies. Juvenile processes of imagination are highly subjective and can be forced into molds of conformity with dangerous ease. Hence, sensitive teachers have found it wise to give careful treatment to the abbreviated stories of children. The following steps are often useful when a child has dictated a story.

1. Ask the young author if you may read his story at the next story-reading time. Abide by his decision. Some children dictate many stories before they are ready to have one read aloud.
2. Read stories from several children.
3. Minimize discussion, but occasionally have the children point out interesting ideas, enjoyable sounds, names, colors, and other details.
4. Point out some bits you liked.
5. File the stories in the children's folders and indicate that on some lucky day there will be more time for story dictation.

THE BEGINNING OF INDEPENDENT WRITING

Although writing one's name can hardly be called "composition," the identification it affords with one's belongings is closely related to the identification so urgently needed between an author and his product. Further, the skills of handwriting and spelling are exercised just as they are in other early activities such as writing the date, room number, and similar brief forms. The manual precision learned in these ways, in the last weeks of kindergarten or early first grade, is for most children a natural introduction to longer writing tasks.

For generations, prior to the last quarter century, children were inducted into writing by learning to write individual letters, one at a time. Parts of letters were isolated for practice. The order of learning was letters, whole words, and finally sentences. Early in this century a number of pioneering teachers discovered that children could begin writing for immediate

communication purposes. Many schools followed along these paths by having children dictate and copy brief memos of a few words and use these compositions as reminders to parents, to friends, or to themselves. Experience and observation show that a child can write a word or phrase that he recognizes and senses as useful to him as easily as he can practice writing one isolated letter again and again.

While no technical research vindicates this approach, there is a wealth of sound, practical experience, evaluated by qualified experts, to recommend that beginning writing can be genuine communication. After a child has gotten the idea that writing has meaning and works for him, the isolation of words and letters for practice in handwriting can be safely attempted. Again, we have no clear picture of how much isolation is valuable. Research is badly needed as to the relationship, if any, between fragmented practice on either handwriting or sentence manipulation and growth in composition skills.

Copying of Dictation

Purpose is the key to any copying that children do. If a class needs only one copy of a letter, there is no reason for each child to make one. If each parent is to be informed, then each child needs to copy the memo or note for his own home. Late in grade 1, a letter or a page for a book may be several sentences or more. Most children, after a year's experience, can copy a composition of brief but reasonable length, with great effort but with success. The job can be shortened for those few who have not developed the necessary coordinations or who show overwhelming fatigue. They may take two or three short sessions for copying or the teacher may copy a portion if fatigue becomes too serious for a struggling writer. Differentiation of handwriting shows where the child stopped. No question of honesty is at stake.

Extending the Beginning of a Letter or Report

Dictation gradually evolves into independent writing as children write additions to their dictated communications. Usually the pupils begin by adding individual endings according to their own interests. Sometimes the reverse of this procedure is help-

ful; that is, the children begin independently and conclude by dictating an ending. Sometimes they copy this dictated finale; other times it stands in the teacher's handwriting. The child's maturity and his degree of fatigue, as well as available time, are the decisive factors. Even after considerable skill in composing and writing has been reached, in middle grades, the dictation technique releases energy which finds its way into more vigorous or more colorful expression.

Planning a Report—Writing Independently

Children show their readiness for greater independence after considerable success in committing ideas to paper by dictation and dictation copying. Sometimes, a few initiate writing on their own. Some write quite extensively when propelled into composition by dictating part of a story, report, or other composition.

Many classroom teachers provide the opportunity for children to plan a sequence of ideas in letters, announcements, and reports. Late in grade 1 and thereafter, a letter requesting parents' permission to go on a trip or an invitation to a program may serve as the setting for this necessary teaching. The parents (or other recipients) need to be informed of the time, place, purpose, and kind of activity. During discussion of the plans, the teacher writes specific items on the blackboard as a memorandum and for help in spelling. In the later primary grades, listing the sequence of steps in some experiment or demonstration in science or the order of events in a trip may serve as a childlike outline for a report.

Relation of Pictures to Writing

That children show spontaneous delight in illustrating stories or in telling whole stories through pictures has long been a commonplace observation. Many classroom teachers have used this impulse to help the beginning writer give greater length and dignity to an abbreviated report of a sentence or two. Likewise, children who add signature and date to a duplicated letter are more intimately related to it as a composition when they ornament it with color and design. The relation of graphic expression to writing has been the subject of limited but careful research.

For example, a third-grade group that folded paper into parts and planned a sequence of pictures to narrate a story expressed more ideas and, curiously enough, even wrote more words and sentences than they did when they planned and merely wrote. Although this study involved a small group, its carefully evaluated findings support the observations of many primary teachers. Apparently the expression of ideas in a visual medium helps many children to cross the threshold from oral communication to graphic symbols to written symbols.

COMPOSITION IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

Research in composition in the middle and upper grades has been concerned largely with the nature of effective stimuli, the volume of productivity, and the evaluation of variety, originality, and facility in writing. Several findings are consistent from study to study; a few conflict and point to the need for clarification of purposes and of research designs. However, a gratifying interest has been shown in the substance and the manner of written expression in the middle grades. At this age the control of writing as a medium comes into its own. Prior to grades 4 and 5, for most children, struggles with the mechanics of writing curtail their use of the art for spontaneous expression.

Content of Written Composition

One significant study of the writing of fifth- and seventh-graders involved comparisons of their writing about direct first-hand experiences and their writing about derived experiences acquired from books, radio and television, and other media. Groups, equated as to IQ and interest in writing, wrote significantly better about *derived* experiences. This study fortifies the earlier professional analyses of writing in middle grades; namely, that immediate, firsthand experience is often too close or too "raw" to be projected into written form without personal reflection and assimilation of the experience. In contrast, when first-hand experience is lifted to the symbolic level by conversation and when insight and new curiosities result from oral exchange, it appears that reality can lead to varied and original writing.

Certainly in the area of content studies thus enriched by direct experience, there is evidence of colorful and perceptive writing. The time needed for this process of gestation is considerable; hence, the problem becomes more acute when pressure for immediate production dominates both classroom teacher and pupils.

The diversity of juvenile interest and of human needs places upon classroom teachers a mandate for a variety of experiences to assure the substance and depth which make writing worth the effort. Children need to become involved in many richly sensory experiences. Likewise, they need opportunity and time to mull over, to digest, and to talk about their experiences. Children also need to live vicariously in the lives of the great and less great in literature. They should enjoy the fine old folk tales and exult in the triumphs of heroes over wicked giants and dwarfs. They should glory in the burgeoning strength of the weak and lowly and appreciate the symmetry and design of oft-told tales. They should savor the verbal spice of the "great, gray, greasy Limpopo River, all set around with fever trees." They should join their voices in the majestic dignity of the Psalms. They should tickle their tongues with the country vernacular of "An' the Gobble-uns 'll git you, ef you don't watch out" and laugh over the sheer ridiculousness of "Antonio, Antonio, was tired of living alonio." There is no substitute for the dimensions of character and episode and the artistry of language to be learned from literature. Movies and graphic illustration may add to this heritage, but nothing can do for the young what a fine sampling of prose and poetry has done for those fortunate enough to be introduced to this realm of experience by wise and observing adults.

Balance in the composition program is essential and comes through two differing but complementary categories of expression. One is practical, utilitarian writing; the other is personal, subjective expression. Both are related to the needs that arise in earliest childhood and continue into adult years.

By common consent, both children and adults need skill in expository writing. In the upper elementary grades the content of expository writing comes partly from miscellaneous firsthand sources but largely from social studies and science. A common practice is to urge or assign children to choose a topic within a unit of class study. Narrowing the topic enough so that suffi-

cient detail can be related to it is as important for children as for mature students. Since each child's study and written expression presumably contributes to the common body of knowledge being amassed by the class, responsibility for dependable accuracy and clarity rests upon the child reporter.

What do pupils in middle and upper grades study when they have a choice? In one recent study three categories of interests emerged as significantly more popular than others available. These three groupings were (a) periods of time (pioneer days, colonial days, middle ages, and the like); (b) people (all people, famous, professional, persons doing individual jobs, children); and (c) cultural aspects of social studies (situations involving freedom, human rights, contributions by other people). The least popular categories were (a) progress through inventions (inventions helping progress in science, medicine, industry, homelife) and (b) social aspects of social studies (reform by religion and politics and effects upon people).

This order of popularity showed statistically significant differences from category to category. Even the *least popular* area of study (social aspects) was selected by 41 percent of the children who participated. The *most popular* category was chosen by 58 percent. These results suggest a broad range of interest among middle-graders. The differences in the interests of middle-grade children are supported by earlier studies, although the specific topics were rated differently.

Many teachers assume, rightly or wrongly, that almost any content takes on interest for children if enough concrete materials and activities are available. The activities include manipulation, observation, discussion, and certain leadership roles, as found in dramatics, demonstration, and illustration. Obviously this theory of teaching concerns composition. In curriculum building the language arts and social studies are seen by many as closely related areas. In recent years science has emerged as a substantial part of the curriculum. Increasingly, children are writing about the content of the social studies and of science in school assignments.

We cannot assume, however, that children are *eager* to write about these areas. Investigations of children's choices in activities related to social studies rated writing low in order of pref-

erence. For many teachers and parents this result will not be a surprise, yet social studies composition is found in an overwhelming majority of schools. Conditions which foster writing worthwhile to the child must obviously be sought. The urge to write, even about a field of considerable interest to a particular child, needs to be fortified by every sound encouragement presently available, if vigorous composition in the content area is to be produced by the child.

Classroom teachers often assume that children should and can write about their individual interests. One investigator asked children to list their avowed interests and then, a week later, to write a composition about any topic they chose. In the first listing of interests no child included writing. In the compositions actually written, only one-third of the children wrote about their personal interests as previously noted. At first, this result is an enigma, but reflection indicates that many interests such as baseball and other sports are served better by gross physical action than by writing. Indeed, "choices" are irrevocably intermeshed with motivation. In writing, perhaps more than in any other school task, a child's motivation needs to be effectively treated. The task is difficult for both teacher and children. Error is easy to detect; correction is laborious; criticism is deflating. Awareness of child needs should be the teacher's central concern. The written product must serve as genuine communication and must enhance the prestige and the power of the individual to engage sufficient honest effort for success and to build desirable attitudes. Class books or portfolios, individual books, illustrated displays, and other products that make writing public appear to be the soundest motivation for expository composition. Only when writing truly serves the child well, in much the same manner as it serves the adult, is the task worth the effort.

Subjective or Personal Writing

What do children write about in the freer realm of story invention? Thousands of imaginative situations occur in their collected stories. Animals appear much more frequently than other characters, both in systematic research and in informal observation.

The animals are often merely disguises for humans whom the children manipulate with greater safety behind the protec-

tive masks. Family situations expressed through animal characters occur with amazing frequency. Child conflicts at home and school are staged in the conversations and actions of juvenile animals. Through them, human relations are identified and explored. Emotional content in such stories is comparatively easy to detect. Even when a child writes imaginatively about a pet and uses some true incident or situation as a mere germ of the narration, his feeling for his pet shows through. It appears that the middle-grade child, otherwise fairly reserved as to display of personal affections, can safely express feeling for an animal.

Another quality of the content of middle-grade writing is that of action. Episodes gallop across the pages. Stories teem with happenings. Sometimes, to the adult mind at least, the burst of energy seems inconsistent, uncoordinated, and lacking in effective resolution. To the young, however, this rarely appears as a defect. "Let things happen" appears to be the slogan of both writer and audience.

Ghosts, goblins, and haunted houses; rugged pioneers, early American Indians, or other primitive peoples; space journeys and interplanetary explorations; tall tales and sojourns into the microscopically tiny; persons of superhuman strength or speed closely akin to that of many folk heroes; machines that come alive and talk or otherwise behave like human beings—these along with animals appear often on the papers of young story-writers. Characters live in a veritable swirl of action completely satisfying to their authors. They apparently gain in stature from uniting storyteller and audience in a cycle of communication. They offer, at the moment, sufficient reward for energy expended without the rounding and refinement which mature taste will demand in later years.

Techniques That Stimulate Story Writing

Many teachers have tried to discover the secret of success in stimulating children to write freely and effectively. Many stimuli have been found to be effective. They vary from class to class and from child to child. One overarching condition of stimulus to continued writing is the personal encouragement given by the teacher herself. From studies made early in this century through relatively recent studies seeking to analyze specific causes and

effects, the influence of a teacher's encouragement on the young learner's efforts stands out clearly.

Clustering around this nucleus of productive approval, other activities have been found significant by investigators. One condition of great importance is that of providing attractive classrooms with a goodly variety of materials to stimulate or suggest experiences that enrich concepts and interests of the learners. Particularly in the elementary school it is necessary to stock the environment with real materials for manipulation and experiment. Both science and art materials contribute not only to learnings in science and the arts but also to a spirit of inquiry and to experimentation with new media. With tangible materials this zest for trial and invention entices almost every child to discover and work out new combinations. Attitudes developed with concrete media and the obvious appreciation of individuality and creativity assist in engendering an atmosphere conducive to writing. Moreover, the linkage between the concrete and the verbal is eminently wholesome. Approval of colorful ways of saying things sharpens awareness of the wonderful world of words and spurs children on to the exploration to be done there.

Developing sensitivity to good writing is another verified procedure. Classroom teachers read aloud to children from a variety of books so that a common store of allusions, humor, and whimsey unite them in their attempts at communication with one another. Further, literary appreciation is strengthened by free and informal chatting about delightful pictures found within the lines of a favorite story, by chuckling over an amusing conversation, by the necessary deflating of a much-too-conceited prime minister, or by the cleverness of an engaging youngster set out to mend the family fortunes. This response is neither an obligation nor a measure of one's status. It is spontaneous and optional; therein lies its power. The effect upon writing of hearing and enjoying good reading is attested to both by researchers and by casual observers. Listening to good literature and responding to it is not copying or imitating of models. Rather, it begets an enhancement of experience which the individual can apply.

Encouraging experimentation with many subjects and in many forms of writing is the classroom teacher's responsibility. Perfection of any one composition form is not the job of the elementary

learner. Eagerness to explore new ways of developing character, new patterns of arrangement, new beginnings that bait the audience—this urge to try new ways of writing should be carefully nurtured in elementary schools.

Children write for an audience. Here is the loadstone of the whole matter. Writing is *for* someone, or to *do* something for the writer. In classes in which stories are joyously shared, the pupils write more and better. A child should not be forced to read aloud a story he does not want others to hear (a condition which occasionally occurs), but stories are *completed* by reaching the audience for whom they were conceived. Both informal, casual practice and structured research on children's reading stories to their classmates support having them read aloud to a responsive audience.

Closely allied with reading children's stories aloud is another technique of equal importance. Providing freedom from fear and taking steps to build self-confidence have been found to be of central importance. This stipulates the absence of negative or reforming criticism in group listening. Criticism of personal writing is particularly damaging if the teacher really wishes self-expression and free experiment. Children learn early how to avoid that which is negated by those in power; but they learn only what *not* to do. In a climate of approval the challenge of reading to an audience of one's peers, to note what brings about their most responsive attention, and to see what old stories are asked for again and again are experiences which produce learning. Approval has been the test that our folk literature has met over the centuries. The audience situation is one that teaches constructively both for the individual and the group. Negative criticism must be replaced by a search for positive examples of vivid, honest writing; of suspense, economy, sensory detail; of natural conversation; and of a variety of ways of revealing character. Pointing up that which is sound writing as it occurs ensures its value and its further use. This is the essence of constructive teaching, and research studies of teachers' ways of fostering creativity attest to its power.

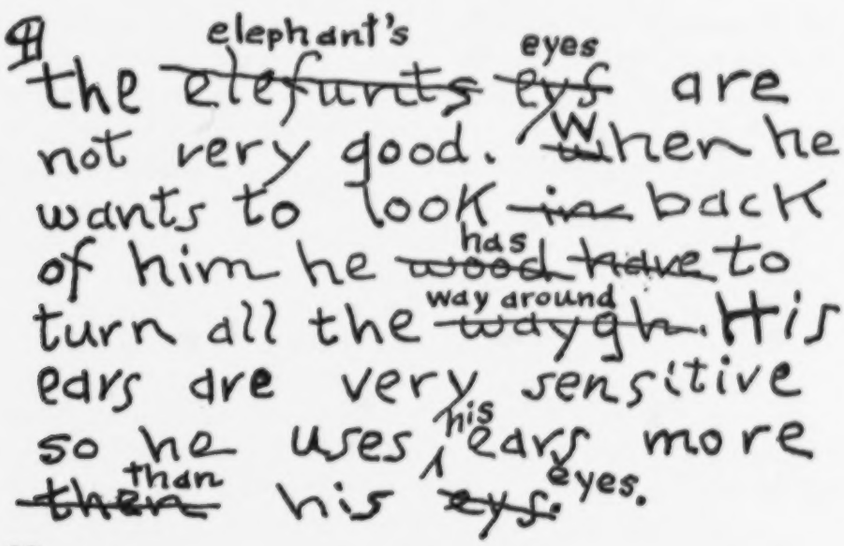
Certain time-sanctioned procedures that have *not* stood up to the testing of research also need to be mentioned. Among these are encouraging children to plan stories before they write, checking the mechanics as they write, experimenting with words for

the sake of using "colorful" or "different" ones, studying vocabulary lists, writing for school newspapers, and requiring self-evaluation of writing. These procedures have been found wanting both by research and by informal appraisal of some sensitive teachers. Examination of these techniques in relation to basic motive and need as well as satisfaction derived therefrom reveals the infringement upon personality. Writing to use certain words required by someone else is directly contrary to the nature of communication, which is a matter of ideas first and foremost. Words are the means to an end, not goals in themselves.

The matter of writing for school newspapers or other publications as a means to creative expression is somewhat baffling. Many schools have witnessed real impetus to writing from publishing pupils' work. In the comprehensive study in which a negative reaction emerged from a large number of superior teachers, it was obvious that a high level of creativity had already been developed. Further incentive to write was not needed; rich and unique expression was not enhanced by publication.

Indeed, dangers of conformity do exist in writing for school papers. Alert and able children often write what they know will be accepted rather than what they might struggle with as an experiment or as a true release of feelings. Stories by children who

Figure 1. Part of a child's report, checked and corrected with the teacher



need the satisfaction of seeing them in print are often screened out in the final selection of material. Both pupil and faculty editors want to make a good impression with their product. When school prestige is a goal of publication, serious problems arise in keeping children's work honest and truly individual.

On the other hand, it is quite true that many classes and whole schools build interest in writing by a variety of publications. Classes produce their own books, as well as occasional magazines and papers, without hurtful restraint or artificial selection. Editing and correcting material to put it into its best form can be a valuable learning here as in other objective writing that others will use and see. It is likely that the pressure of meeting publication deadlines and fitting into adult standards of form and content are the dangers most to be avoided in the elementary school. Moreover, as writing affords children deep satisfactions in simple, face-to-face class situations, children need less and less external motivation. For children having these intrinsic returns, school publications seem to add little. For other groups, well-conducted school publications may initiate greater interest and considerable success in writing.

Teaching Correct Mechanics

If one avoids the negative results of correcting children's stories as noted by thoughtful observers for nearly a half century,

Figure 2. The child has made a copy of his corrected draft

The elephant's eyes are not very good. When he wants to look back of him he has to turn all the way around. His ears are very sensitive so he uses his ears more than his eyes.

how, then, does one teach correctness? Exercises in grammatical analysis, diagramming, and the like have been shown to make no measurable contribution to children's writing, even in the eighth and ninth grades. To preserve spontaneity and to teach the conventions of American-English usage is a dual responsibility. The dilemma has been wrestled with by many, and highly successful demonstrations point to some solutions.

In the area of objective writing (expositions, letters, memoranda, notes, captions, and the like), children should write and correct their rough drafts. Preferably this editing should be done with the teacher. Only the teacher can offer the professional guidance and the encouragement needed by the young worker. Reading aloud is the best test of the complete sentence in the opinion of many teachers. Both elementary school teachers and linguistic scholars agree upon the oral-auditory pattern as the practical test of the sentence. As child or teacher reads aloud, proper terminal or other punctuation is applied to correspond to voice signals the child perfected unconsciously many years before the intermediate grades. Spelling errors are detected, and usually the correct form is given by the teacher. Occasionally, a verbally efficient sixth-grader can consult the dictionary to correct a misspelled word on a rough draft. He will not lose the thought, now that much of it is down. But for many children, even with the rough draft retaining the ideas, time spent in lengthy dictionary searches so compounds the difficult task of writing that it is far better to write the word for the child or to spell it for him. Opinion is given here, in the absence of detailed research. Further light is needed as to where the use of the dictionary helps and where it hinders composition.

Rewriting a first draft and making a "good copy" climaxes the effort of making the necessary revisions in phraseology, sequence, spelling, and statement of fact. The amount of correction of content depends upon the purpose and the attention span of the learner. Ornamenting and displaying the finished copy on bulletin boards or in exhibit cases, along with pertinent visual objects, may be the final step. Binding reports in books and illustrating them, sending the letters, and posting the notices or memos likewise are ways to complete a cycle of communication. The satisfactions from this display and the realization of initial purpose

need to be richly savored to build a ready acceptance of the physical drudgery of further writing. Readiness for new learning stems from the sense of power and the intrinsic rewards of previous work. The spiral of effort and satisfaction is an enlarging one.

RELATION OF SPELLING TO COMPOSITION

The dictum of spelling investigators is clearer than almost any other in the complex of the language arts. It is, "Teach the 2,000 to 3,000 words needed most by children and adults." These words have been efficiently identified. Many spelling texts carry them. (Some carry far more, too!) Beyond these known words of maximum frequency, the chance of needing one word rather than another is one out of an astronomical figure. Hence, the practice of requiring children to study all the words they ask for in concocting a story about a flight to Mars or the antics of a runaway family of giraffes is founded upon sand and water rather than upon the rock of a proven, ongoing need. Tell the child the word he asks for when he is writing a story. Better still, write it for him on a slip of paper. When a story is to be read to the class, correct the spelling sufficiently for him to read.

In objective, utilitarian writing the correction should be done clearly on the rough draft. The child will write the word as a whole when he makes his good copy. This parallels closely the correcting of the test form, which has been found strategic as a *method of teaching* correct spelling. Proofreading the final draft gives an additional exposure to correct form. Further, time spent on studying these words of low frequency is a hazardous investment. Moreover, the risk of limiting further writing to what the child is fairly sure he can spell is too great a threat to intellectual activity to be encouraged in any school.

RELATION OF HANDWRITING TO COMPOSITION

No superiority of one style of writing over another for purposes of expression has yet been established. Classroom teachers often express concern over the transition from manuscript to cursive style in grade 3 when children are still struggling for the

needed coordinations. Greater legibility of manuscript writing on the part of children is generally taken for granted; the problem of speed is as yet unsettled. Because of traditional demands to teach cursive writing, methods of making the transition with a minimum of loss have been examined. The effect upon written expression, however, has not been assured. Many teachers of eight- and nine-year-olds think they detect deterioration in composition when a new set of writing skills becomes the focus of attention. Only qualified opinion is available, and here, again, no agreement exists.

EVALUATION OF CHILDREN'S COMPOSITION

Since composition is to so great a degree an expression of the total personality, it is only logical that its evaluation should be related to a child's total growth. Even physical growth is uneven in any month-to-month or year-to-year accounting. Likewise, unevenness of output in writing is found in the case records of children whose writing has been preserved. Growth in both length and quality is irregular as one peruses these writings. The overall direction of growth throughout the six years of elementary school, however, is toward longer writings, longer and more involved sentence structure, and more varied expression.

In one recent study, children in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades in certain schools were asked to write in response to a narrative film. In general the children wrote more and with greater variety at each succeeding grade level. These are averages, however, showing central tendencies of a group. Not every child grows in this fashion. Some become more economical in phraseology as well as in selection of detail and in story design. Some may find the film or other specific stimulus uncongenial to their needs. By contrast with this, the desirable finding of generally increased variety, earlier investigators, who also found length and correctness increasing in the upper grades, discovered also a dulling of spontaneity, a deadening of interest, and less rather than more variety of expression. Many persons are concerned about this loss of originality with increased schooling. Such deterioration in a composition program should be discovered if it occurs, and evaluating techniques, applied to an entire school,

should aim at assessing this essential quite as much as at the discovery of how well children spell and complete and punctuate sentences.

For purposes of a school survey, use can be made of a broadside technique, such as a film or a dramatization of human relations up to the point of, but not including, resolution of conflict or tension. Another device is the presentation of one or two beginning sentences followed by a request for completion of a story or incident. We should study clear indications of growth in imagery, variety of expression, length of composition, and complexity of sentence pattern. For individual diagnosis such measures have not been validated. Indeed, no single piece of writing is ever considered a satisfactory test of individual ability. For school-wide study, to note shortages and strengths in content, style, and form at various grades, such activities at infrequent intervals of once or twice a year are revealing as *group* measures.

Several techniques for measuring growth in syntax have been validated in comprehensive research. These are (a) the number of different words, (b) the length of sentences, (c) the proportion of dependent clauses used, and (d) the number of independent clauses with or without related dependent clauses. These careful analyses can occasionally be used for class or school diagnostic purposes. The time needed for such a study, however, is costly, and statistical procedures for assessing significance of differences from class to class are of paramount importance. Unless appropriate statistical correction can be applied by persons who know both the basic teaching problems and measurement procedures, these two techniques, even though highly regarded, should be set aside.

Analyses of individual and group growth can be made in an informal fashion or be closely regularized by groups of teachers who read and reach agreement on goals and examples of varied achievements. The latter, more nearly objective evaluation focuses upon content as well as style and mechanics. It depends upon careful analysis and necessitates systematic training of the raters. Individuals or teams of raters formulate the items to be assessed in each category. When rating the writing of factual *content*, they look for such matters as worthwhile ideas, supporting data, accurate information, appropriate sequence, and other

qualities; when rating imaginative or other narrative, they look for imaginative elements, characterization, movement of plot, and surprising and appropriate resolution. When rating for *style*, they search for originality of language, sensory detail, imagery, fluency, and other factors. When rating for *correct mechanics*, they include capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and sentences.

Quantitative values are assigned to each of the qualities agreed upon. Either teams or individuals must practice rating specimen papers, using a guide sheet for the items selected in each category. Different teams should read and rate for each category, or the same teams may work on all three but at different times. Reader fatigue must be avoided. Anonymity of pupils must be prearranged in order to avoid personal bias.

Obviously such careful attempts at objectivity in rating pupils' compositions is a complicated affair and should be undertaken only after a thorough study of the research already done in the field of composition evaluation.

Another type of rating is that of recording the first impression of general excellence. For most schools seeking to evaluate composition programs, this procedure may prove to be more fruitful. Teachers read and assign a numerical value to each composition, perhaps on a scale from 1-5, after one reading only. This evaluation should be quickly arrived at and should combine general overall reaction to content, style, and mechanics. After a practice session, teachers should discuss difficulties and ways to arrive at a quick judgment. Each paper should be rated by three or more readers and their ratings averaged. Even though this procedure is somewhat more economical of time, it, too, requires careful statistical handling of the scores arrived at for grades or classes. Significance of differences should be calculated from grade to grade or among different schools in the same system. There are no easy shortcuts in the intricate matter of evaluating compositions which are the result of complicated mental processes and liable to many kinds of evaluation depending upon the interests and standards of the professional staff.

Probably the most thoroughgoing and dependable evaluation of a school program in writing rests in a combination of a standard test; an evaluation procedure administered throughout the school, whether of the detailed analytical type or a first-impression rating; and a sampling of selected case records of individuals.

A potential gold mine is available for research in the cumulative records of samples of pupil writing over a period of a year or, better still, of several years. Regardless of the type of program evaluation used in a school, or even if such an overarching assessment is not made at all, teachers will benefit from a perusal of the case records of the pupils they teach. Such a study should result not in a numerical rating but rather in a clear impression, whether recorded or not, of the pupil's attitudes toward writing. Does he do some writing voluntarily? Does he try new format and styles? Does he "let himself go" in imagination? Does he show responsibility to report factual matter accurately? A second search by the teacher should be for the pupil's power in putting substance into his writing. Are there ideas there that are essential? Is he lost in a sea of minutiae? Does he write in honest even though crude and childlike style or does he depend upon book language? The third concern, of necessity, must be with correct form. Does the pupil handle the conventions of spelling, sentence predication, and punctuation with reasonable control? Are his second drafts carefully done? Does he show increasing skill and responsibility in proofreading?

Clearly any assessment of an individual's growth in composition must be concerned with many facets of wholesome personality development, with fundamentals of individual integrity, with increasing creativity and power, as well as successful achievement in clarity and correctness of communication.

PROBLEMS OF MOTIVATION

It is probable that children's specific needs for composition closely parallel those of adults. To inform, to seek help or needed materials, to startle attention and direct it, to release feeling, to clarify ideas, and to entertain are among the urges of young and old. Upon what motivation do children learn to apply the energy needed to use written composition for these ends rather than to use the easier oral medium?

Here, only conjecture can supply an answer. Young children in the preschool years dramatize writing in charming, colorful scrawls often enough to suggest that they want to write and to

read because they see adults doing these things. These acts are part of the adult world; children want to become a part of this world. The urge toward acculturation is strong and universal.

When beginners from disadvantaged homes have not seen adults use reading and writing plentifully, this lack must be compensated for. Children thus deprived must learn to feel adequate and comfortable with teachers who use these symbols meaningfully for the children themselves. Talking and listening to them, reading stories to them, and writing down some of their words are obvious needs.

Early in the arduous task of learning to use the conventional written symbols which adults use for their thought and feeling, the child faces difficult hurdles. At this strategic phase a new motivation is available and should be employed. It is the drive for power and the need for extending the radius of effectiveness. Those distant in time and space can be affected by one's written word. Goods can be got, activities can be arranged, obstacles can be moved by the magic of words on paper. Friends near at hand can be amused or beguiled by one's imagination caught in writing. The comparative weakness of the individual is compensated for by the power of his written words.

On the heels of this power-centered motive comes the more humanistic one of self-realization. Children who feel the satisfaction of saying exactly what they intended, of using just the words that evoke a wanted response in their audience, come to understand better the very experiences, whether real or vicarious, that they have preserved in written form. Through enhancing experiences they learned more about them and hence about themselves. Further, they became alert and sensitive to techniques and qualities of writing in the literature they read and hear.

If these stages of growth are well lived, the elementary school child learns by early adolescence, perhaps, the necessity of studying composition as an art. What are the possibilities and the risks in each form of writing? How have the great writers used these forms? What of their bequest can I use that is true to me and the age in which I live? What new techniques can I invent?

The task of the elementary school is not to turn out writing polished in adult style. Teachers will not expect perfection, for they know that children's composition, though effective, color-

ful, and individual, is also crude, experimental, and often symbolic. Knowing this, they can encourage, stimulate, and keep open the channels of expression; they can enrich and enjoy the fruits of childish labor by balancing drudgery and joy; they can correct in objective communication where correctness is appropriate and leave untouched the individual image that speaks from child to child. In viewing the long growth from the first words limping on the page to the vigorous productivity of high school youth, teachers will benefit from a perspective of knowledge about growth in each succeeding phase of expression and from the assurance of emerging articulate power.

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18. Teaching Composition (Alvina T. Burrows)
19. Group Processes in Elementary and Secondary Schools (Louis M. Smith)
20. Teaching the Social Studies (Jonathon C. McLendon)
21. Understanding Intergroup Relations (Jean D. Grambs)
22. About the Kindergarten (Elizabeth M. Fuller)
23. Art Education in the Elementary School (Hilda P. Lewis)
24. Mental Health (Robert F. Peck and James V. Mitchell, Jr.)
25. The Educable Mentally Retarded Child in the Elementary School (Herbert Goldstein)
26. Physical Fitness (Paul Hunsicker)
27. Physical Education in the Elementary Schools (Anna S. Espenschade)
28. Creativity (E. Paul Torrance)
29. Listening (Stanford E. Taylor)
30. Anxiety as Related to Thinking and Forgetting (Frederick F. Lighthall)
31. Improving Classroom Testing (Max D. Engelhart)
32. Controlling Classroom Misbehavior (William J. Gnagey)